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IS IN FARM ABANDONMENT



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Farm Economics and Statistics Branch, Ontario Department of Agriculture
Parliament Buildings, Toronto 2, Ontario, Canada

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TRENDS IN FARM ABANDONMENT

HENRY F. NOBLE¹

FARM abandonment is a slow process. In the Province of Ontario there has been a marked *drop out* of some two and a half million acres of occupied farm land from 1941 to 1956². While a drop in agricultural production at the present time would not in itself be bad, there are two aspects which should give us some concern: 1) We have declining communities with the difficulties that arise in terms of maintaining good social facilities such as schools, churches, roads and other communications. 2) The line of abandonment usually results in a growth of trees which may not be valuable for forestry, but which would make the land very expensive to rehabilitate for agriculture, if and when it is needed. A study of the historical processes involved may enable us to avoid the undesirable features of the process and secure the necessary adjustment without the losses which now accompany it.

"History is like a surveyor's transit; unless we use it frequently to look back and get our bearings, it will not be of much help to use in running a straight line ahead!"³

In the study of farm units an intermediate stage was found in which the land ceases to be operated as an active farm unit. Since the alternative use of the farm unit after it ceases to be operated as an active farm unit could be subject to a policy, an important consideration was to know when the farm unit would cease as an active farm unit. This would represent the point at which the alternative use of the land could be determined either by policy or indirection.

There has been a decrease of over two million acres of occupied farm land in the Province of Quebec.⁴ Reverse trends for the three Prairie Provinces (Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta) showed an *increase* of over six and a half million acres of occupied farm land during the same period. The decline in Ontario and Quebec becomes even more serious when it is realized that over 62 per cent (62.8%) of the entire Canadian population at June 1, 1960, is estimated to be located in Ontario and Quebec,⁵ but having only 22 per cent of the crop land of Canada. If these present trends in Ontario continue, then as time goes on the food supply will be coming from further afield. To many farm operators the process of "fall out" of occupied farm land represents a considerable loss to their personal life and life savings. In time this loss could affect the system of many local institutions, especially where the survival of local schools and churches becomes too burdensome on too few people. If the schools are not well maintained, the families of the farm operators are deprived of

¹Ontario Department of Agriculture. The author wishes to acknowledge the advice given by H. L. Patterson, J. B. Nelson, S. H. H. Symons, J. H. Clark, M. Csaba, D. Campbell, V. Gilchrist and W. T. Noble.

²D.B.S. Census of Canada, 1941, 1951 and 1956.

³Bath, G. H., "Whatsoever Things".

⁴D.B.S., 1960 Estimates.

the opportunity to become well trained; then eventually the cities will become affected.

The realization of these abnormal agricultural problems led to the "Survey of Social Problems of Land Use in Selected Areas of Ontario, 1810-1956". Much interest on this subject is also being acknowledged by the Canada Department of Agriculture⁶ by introducing the Agricultural Rehabilitation and Development Act, which some sources predict may cost six hundred millions over the next two decades.⁷

The problem of a decrease in occupied farm land has been pinpointed by the Farm Economics and Statistics Branch, Ontario Department of Agriculture, on the printed maps, "Social Problems of Land Use in Ontario Series" depicting changes in acreage of occupied farm land by census year periods.⁸ The first maps prepared and printed⁹ represented the period 1941 to 1951. Recently, a report was published entitled "Ontario's Shrinking Farm Lands".¹⁰ Prior to this the realization of normal agricultural problems led to the "Farm Title Transfer Survey, 1900-1950".¹¹

The question of who farms and the conditions under which he shall operate are largely determined by the method under which farm possession passes from one operator to another. Thus, the "Farm Title Transfer Survey 1900 to 1950" was a study of what happened when there was a change in farm ownership followed by the "Survey of Social Problems of Land Use in Selected Areas in Ontario 1810 to 1956". The purpose of this latter study was to establish the changes which have occurred and are occurring in land use where agricultural production is decreasing, or is being maintained in an area of decrease. Relatively little exact information about trends in farm abandonment in Ontario was known, although numerous assumptions were sometimes made.

How the Change Took Place

The process of adjustment was slow. If the procedure by which this decline has come about is understood, then it will be much easier to determine how this land could be better used. Records of approximately 1,700 farm operators were obtained from 613 separate farm units in selected areas of Ontario, representing the time from the earliest farm operator in 1810 to that of 1956 inclusive. A complete ownership history of all the farms contained within eight separate block samples was recorded, and the method of sampling was quite similar to that used for the Farm Title Transfer Survey. Similarly, an intensive examination of each County Registry Office was conducted of their records to ascertain

⁶The Globe and Mail, Toronto, March 24, 1961.

⁷Toronto Telegram, March 24, 1961.

⁸Social Problems of Land Use in Ontario Series, printed maps, Farm Economics and Statistics Branch, Ontario Department of Agriculture.

⁹Prepared by J. B. Nelson, Associate Director, Farm Economics and Statistics Branch, Ontario Dept. of Agriculture, Toronto, Canada.

¹⁰Ontario's Shrinking Farm Lands by J. B. Nelson and D. N. Nicolson.

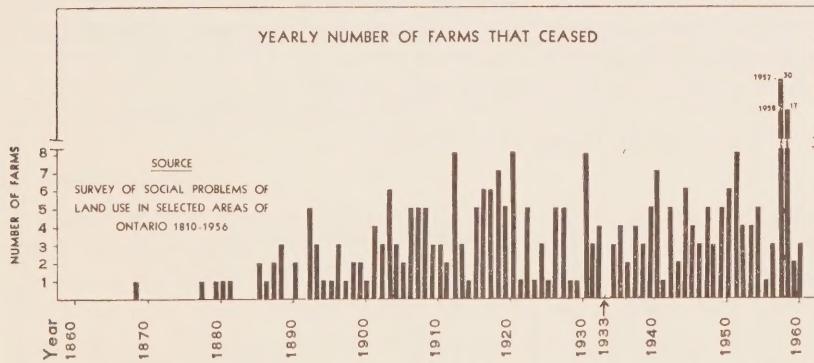
¹¹Farm Title Transfer Survey 1900-1950 by Henry F. Noble.

needed data concerning the correct dates and ownership, the incidence of farm mortgage and the farm acreage of each farm unit during the period of the first settler to the last farm operator prior to 1957. A roadside examination of the individual farm units was then conducted to observe the use of the land as of 1956. Again, one of the most important methods of approach in the sampling was consultation with selected and recommended "older farm residents" of that particular farm community to obtain the required family histories of each individual farm operator. The salient findings should be useful indicators in understanding trends in farm abandonment.

1. Changes in Farm Size

Areas were studied where the farm decline was evident. Forty-one per cent of all the farm units studied in this survey had ceased to be operated as separate active farm units¹¹ by the close of 1956. In the majority of cases (57%) the farm units that ceased to operate were combined to form larger farm units by 1956. Previous research has shown that the majority (55%) of farm units showed no change in acreage from 1901 to 1950 and that each farm unit averaged three different farm operators during the same period¹². Even under abnormal agricultural conditions, over a third (37%) of all the farm units studied showed no change in total acreage during the entire duration of the original farm settler to 1956 inclusive. Although the process of ceasing to operate was slow, recent indications revealed that this trend did not cease at the conclusion of 1956, but is continuing (Chart #1).

CHART 1

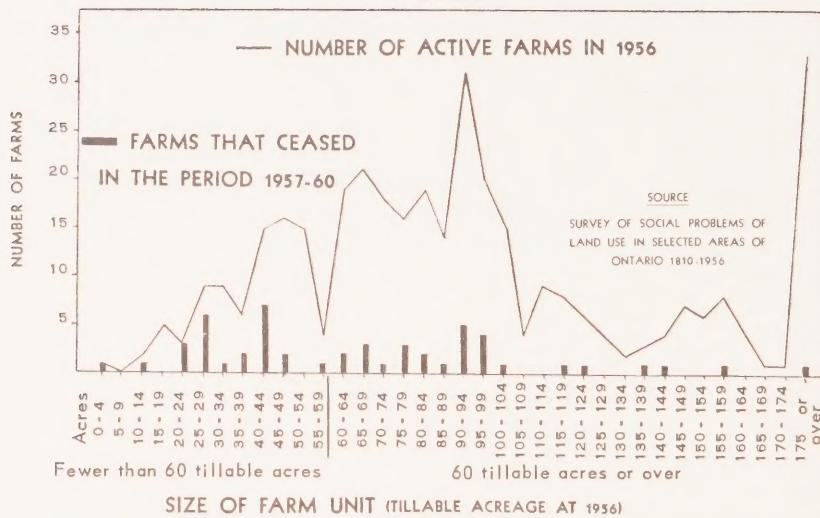


Early in the summer of 1960, a quick roadside examination of the 1956 farm units in this survey was made (Chart #2) with the assistance of highly recommended and well qualified older farm residents. The findings showed that 14 per cent of all the "1956" farm units had completely

¹¹"Active Farm Units" for the purpose of this survey refers only to those farms where the buildings still remain and are in use with the land by the farm operator as of December 31, 1956. Thus, all other farm units would be classified as having ceased.

¹²Farm Title Transfer Survey 1900 to 1950 by Henry F. Noble, March 1955.

CHART 2



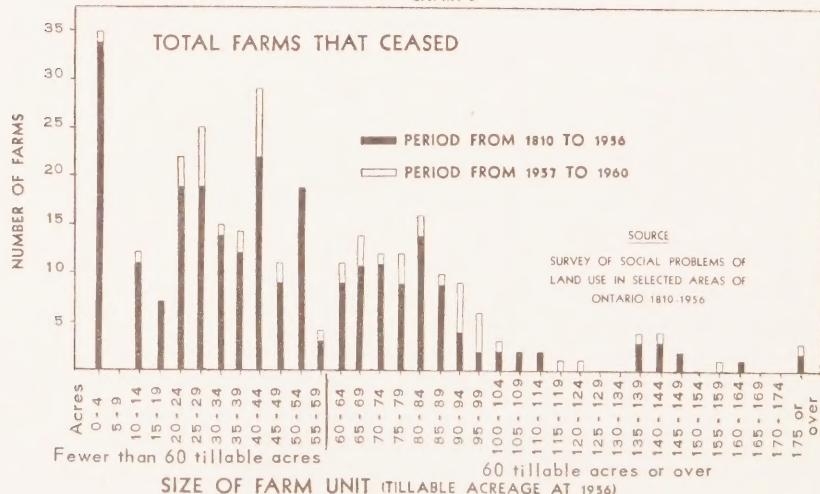
SIZE OF FARM UNIT (TILLABLE ACREAGE AT 1956)

ceased sometime during 1957 to 1960 and that fewer than half (46%) of the total farms were actively farmed. The remaining group of farms (40%) were operated in a semi-active manner because of age, health, or a source of an extra income for the farm operator and/or his wife.

2. Farm Shape and Size

Awkward shapes of farm units did not seem to be a factor in the amount of "fall out" of farms. Many of the farms (42%) that ceased to operate were compact in shape, similar to a square 100 acre unit. Of all the farms that ceased in this entire survey by 1960, over three out of every five of these farms (63%) were small in size, having fewer than 60 tillable acres (Chart #3).

CHART 3



SIZE OF FARM UNIT (TILLABLE ACREAGE AT 1956)

Total size of farm by tillable acreage is a most important factor to be considered in studying trends in farm abandonment.

From recent farm management studies of the younger commercial non-specialized farm operators of Central Ontario and Western Ontario beef and dairy general farms three factors (farm size, farm gross sales, and farm fixed costs) show that the only group of farms that had significantly low labour incomes were the farms with fewer than 50 acres in crop (or approximately fewer than 60 tillable acres). On farms producing crops, the relatively high cost of machinery and the high cost of overhead on a crop acre basis would suggest that the major reason for low labour income on farms with fewer than 50 crop acres is that these fixed expenses are too high for small farms.¹⁸ Size of farm of at least 60 tillable acres or over would thus appear to be *one of the most important minimum requirements for an active farm unit* in an area remote from large city markets and in an area where the climate and crops are best suited to the production of cattle. This is the condition in most of the areas in Ontario where "fall out" is occurring.

3. *The Road at the Gate*

No farm family in this day and age would like to be completely isolated. Thus, the road at the gate was considered to be an important indicator in trends in farm abandonment. Fifteen per cent of the farms that had ceased were located on non-passable roads that no longer existed, and another small group of farms (10%) were located along dirt roads open to travel only in the dry summer season. The majority of the other farms that had ceased (72%) were located by gravel roads, and only a very small group (3%) by surfaced roads. Almost all the farms still active at 1956 (98%) benefited by the convenience of passable roads to their farm gateway most of the year.

4. *Farm Buildings*

Since most of these are livestock farms, the barn is a most important money earning factor over the years. On the farms that ceased the majority of the barns (89%) were small in size and of frame construction (65%) and with over a third (34%) being of log construction. Of the farms that had ceased by 1956, barns had completely disappeared on more than two-thirds (69%).

On farms that ceased the majority of the houses (88%) were small in size and either of frame construction (51%) or of log construction (42%). On the majority of farms that ceased (73%) the houses had completely disappeared by 1956.

¹⁸From unpublished data by J. H. Clark, Economist, Farm Economics and Statistics Branch, Ontario Dept. of Agriculture, Ontario Agricultural College, Guelph, Ontario, Sept. 25, 1961. This data was collected for the Ontario Farm Management and Accounting Study.

Why the Change Took Place

The process of adjustment involving the decrease of occupied farm land is slow, and need not be as drastic as a sudden displacement. The process of adjustment can be much easier for the younger generation than for the older. Today, youth has greater opportunities of obtaining a better education than their parents had. The pattern of life on many of the farms that appear semi-abandoned or show signs of decline is often more suitable to the older farm operator, because as his needs decline this type of life more readily fits his life pattern. Under these circumstances it can hardly be termed as an "agricultural slum". R. W. Emerson once remarked that, "the first farmer was the first man and all historic nobility rests on possession and use of land". The quality of rural life and the efficiency of operating the farm is largely determined by those who farm. In order that this survey might shed much light in dealing with the question of trends in farm abandonment the background and knowledge of these farm operators and their families was necessary. For the farms studied (613), family histories were obtained for 1675 farm operators, representing the period 1810 to 1956 inclusive.

1. Degree of Intensity of Operator at Ceasing

Fewer than half of the farm operators (40%) were practising full-time farming at the time that the farm unit ceased. On over a third of the farms that ceased (35%) the farm operator was a part-time farm operator employed in extra work off the farm. Another small group (13%) were practising only pasture farming.

2. Future Occupation of Operator

From 1900 to 1950 in Ontario most farm operators continued farming to the end of their active life. Almost one-half farmed until death, and another third until retirement.¹⁴ The "Survey of Social Problems of Land Use in Selected Areas of Ontario 1810-1956" showed that on over a third of all the farms that ceased (34%) the last operator farmed until he died, and that only a few had retired (16%). One operator out of five (22%) continued farming outside the sampled area. Approximately the same percentage of operators (23%) chose occupations other than farming after the farm ceased.

3. Use of Farm by Next Operator

With farm ownership as the prevailing type of farm tenure during the last few decades in Ontario Agriculture, little change, if any, could be expected between the next farm owner and the next farm operator. Such expectations were the findings of this survey. Over half of all the farms that ceased (57%) were amalgamated to form larger farm units by 1956, and a small group (5%) were operated as non-resident pasture farms.

¹⁴Farm Tenure in Ontario 1900-1950, Ontario Department of Agriculture Circular No. 214, June, 1954.

One out of ten of the other farm units that ceased (14%) returned to lumber and less than one-tenth (8%) were used as private dwellings. Almost the same percentage of farms that ceased (7%) became summer or winter resorts or private hunting camps. A small group of farms (5%) became abandoned, especially in the more recently developed agricultural areas.

4. Source of Operator

On farms that ceased the majority of the last farm operators (87%) were farmers' sons raised either on local farms (59%) or on this farm (17%) or from other Canadian farms (11%). One per cent were spinsters! Almost identical percentages appeared for farms still operated at 1956 (93%), since the majority of these farm operators were also farmers' sons.

5. Origin of Operator's Wife

On farms that had ceased, 18 per cent of the last farm operators were bachelors, but the majority of farm operators (60%) married local farm daughters or farm girls from other Canadian farms (11%). The importance of the role of a farmer's wife in Ontario was shown from the results of this survey, where most of the farm operators (89%) on farms at 1956 were married either to local farm girls (67%) or to other Canadian farm girls (15%). These results were quite similar to the "Farm Title Transfer Survey" where most of the Ontario mixed livestock farm operators and their wives were also born and raised on farms within their own locality.¹⁵

6. Occupation of Mature Children

Marked differences were noticeable in a comparison of both surveys¹⁶ in relation to the occupation of mature¹⁷ children. In the Farm Title Transfer Survey, two-thirds of the mature sons chose farming as their vocations. In the Survey of Social Problems of Land Use in Selected Areas in Ontario 1810 to 1956, only half of the mature children (51%) of the parents on farms that had ceased chose farming as a vocation and a minority group (4%) chose professional occupations.¹⁸ All other mature children (45%) on farms that ceased chose vocations other than farming or the professions. There were marked differences in the activities of mature children from farms that still operated at 1956. An increase was noticeable in the numbers of those choosing professions (12%) and in those choosing vocations other than farming or the professions (49%).

¹⁵Full report, Farm Title Transfer Survey 1900-1950, Henry F. Noble.

¹⁶The Statistical Appendix (June 16, 1961) to "Survey of Social Problems of Land Use in Selected Areas of Ontario 1810 to 1956" and "Farm Title Transfer Survey 1900-1950" Farm Economics and Statistics Branch, Ontario Department of Agriculture.

¹⁷"Mature" refers to the farm children who had completed their elementary or secondary education.

¹⁸Professional refers to the farm children who had completed or who were completing their College or University education.

7. Farm Mortgages

The Farm Title Transfer Survey showed that the family farm in Ontario requires a change of ownership every generation and that the almost universal mortgaging of farms seems to be a necessary corollary of this process. Mortgaging¹⁹ and the source of the original farm mortgage²⁰ are most important deciding factors in permitting a farm operator to become established on a farm in Ontario.²¹ This was also indicated in the results of the Survey of Social Problems of Land Use in Selected Areas of Ontario 1810-1956.

On farms that ceased many of the last farm operators (43%) were operating farms that were not mortgaged during their farm tenure. *Almost ten per cent (9.6%) of all the farm units studied in this entire survey had never been mortgaged from original crown deed or patent until 1956 inclusive.* (Farms that ceased: 6.5; farms that were operated at 1956: 3.1%). Previous study showed that ownership was the predominant type of farm tenure from 1900 to 1950 and that 21 years was the average duration of active farming for typical farm operators on the Ontario mixed livestock farms.²² In Ontario, as ownership was the predominant type of farm tenure, the majority of operators (47%) on mortgaged farms that ceased, held an ownership type of tenure. Even on the farms that were operating at 1956, over one-third (36%) were *not* mortgaged. The majority (53%) were mortgaged during an ownership type of tenure.

The Farm Title Transfer Survey showed that six per cent of all the farm units from 1901 to 1950 were never mortgaged; eight per cent were always mortgaged.

Of the mortgaged farms that ceased 1810-1956, the source of the majority of these original farm mortgages were classified as other individuals (45%),²³ or as sellers (20%),²⁴ or as family individual (4%).²⁵ There were two other small groups represented: 11 per cent classified as veteran and other governmental loans and 20 per cent classified as from Loan Companies. On farms operating at 1956, almost two-thirds (64%) were mortgaged sometime during the present farm operator's tenure. The sources of these original farm mortgages revealed trends of importance; in particular they indicated that there has been an increase in seller mortgages (28%), family individual mortgages (6%), and veteran or government loans (23%). Two out of five of the mortgages (40%)

¹⁹Mortgaging refers only to the farm mortgages that were registered and would not include bank or personal loans or chattel mortgages.

²⁰Farm mortgage refers only to the conveyance of farm property by the debtor (or mortgagor) to the creditor (or mortgagee) as security for debt with the proviso that it shall be reconveyed on payment within a certain period.

²¹Farm Tenure in Ontario 1900-1950, Circular No. 214, Ontario Department of Agriculture, 1954.

²²Ibid.

²³An "other individual" mortgage refers to a farm mortgage held by a person other than the seller or other member within the family.

²⁴A "seller" mortgage refers to a farm mortgage held by the previous farm owner.

²⁵A "family" mortgage refers to a farm mortgage held by some member of the family, but does not include "seller".

were classified as other individual. A small group of original farm mortgages (3%) were held either by loan companies or by chartered banks.

Conclusions

Results from the Survey of Social Problems of Land Use in Selected Areas in Ontario 1910-1956, show five conclusions are applicable and should be seriously considered by all members of our Agricultural Profession who hope to accomplish sound results in this phase "Trends in Farm Abandonment". The conclusions are

1. Farm abandonment is a slow process. Changing to a completely new method of making a living can be very difficult for people who are past middle age, but because the process of adjustment has been slow much personal sacrifice has been avoided.
2. Size of farm of at least 60 tillable acres or over, in the area studied would appear to be one of the most important minimum requirements for an active farm unit in an area remote from large city markets and where the climate and crops are best suited to the production of cattle.
3. There is need to realize clearly:
 - a) that some farm units are likely to remain active permanent farms,
 - b) that other farm units would need only a small enlargement in tillable acreage or in intensity to become good units.
4. An economic land use classification is needed, founded on an understanding of the most important minimum requirements of an active farm unit in its present size and location.
5. Pilot projects should be set up to determine the economic suitability of operations at other scales of operations or levels of intensity particularly in the development of pasture possibilities on larger units.

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